Corps wants to cut water release at Hartwell

Residents want longer-term plan to maintain water level

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As dry weather continues to take a toll on Upstate lakes, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is considering temporary action to keep more water in the lakes this winter, while critics contend that more could be done sooner to protect the lakes during drought.

After recovering in 2009 from a long-term drought that lowered Lake Hartwell more than 22 feet, leaving boat ramps dry and threatening drinking water intakes, signs of drought returned this summer.

The Upstate has been in an initial, least severe, stage of drought since July. The National Weather Service predicts drought will continue and intensify in the region through the winter.

As a precaution against the predicted drier winter, the Corps of Engineers wants to reduce the amount of water released downstream through the Lake Thurmond dam from Jan. 1 until Feb. 15.

This would keep more water in lakes Hartwell, Russell and Thurmond, which the corps operates as a single system. However, it means less water going downstream to supply drinking water, industry needs, and fresh water marshes near the coast.



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A public comment period is open through noon Monday to receive input on the impact of reducing the amount of water released through the Lake Thurmond dam below a federally mandated level.

The Lake Hartwell Association board "strongly advocates" reduced flows and is encouraging individuals and business owners to mail or e-mail comments to the corps, said Herb Burnham, president of the more than 2,000-member association that seeks to keep more water in the lake throughout the year.

See WATER on page 4A

WATER

FROM PAGE 1A

The corps is following a "pretty standard" procedure for winter drought, Burnham said. "They could do a better job before we hit the drought levels."

Lake Hartwell Association leaders "are really looking after the best interests of Lake Hartwell," but there are downstream needs as well, Col. Jeff Hall, commander of the corps' Savannah district, told *The Greenville News*.

Considerations include recreation, electricity production, water quality and supply, and protection of endangered species.

"It's really about balancing all the requirements. At certain times during the year, some have priorities over others because of what's going on," Hall said.

Lake Hartwell is 6 feet below full pool. For several months, the lakes have been at drought level 1, the initial drought trigger in the corps' lake management plan. The plan limits release from Thurmond to between 4,200 and 3,800 cubic feet of water per second at level 1.

In mid-October, the corps dropped to 4,000 cubic feet per second, within the permissible range. The corps now seeks a drop to 3,600 cubic feet per second. The public comment period is part of an environmental assessment that is required before the corps can deviate from its lake management plan.

The reduced flow would have no significant environmental impacts, according to a draft environmental assessment signed by Hall.

Flow through the Thurmond dam would be reduced only if lake levels stay below drought triggers. Greater flow could be restored before Feb. 15 if requested by the states of South Carolina and Georgia.

Upstate residents who live on the lake or drive across it on daily commutes have seen the red clay ring around the shore expand its reach in recent months. It's a concern for residents who saw Hartwell drop to the shocking and unprecedented 22-foot low that exposed old road beds and bridges long under water.

It's a sight Burnham doesn't want to see again.

While welcome, the proposed winter flow reduction is a short-term measure, and the Lake Hartwell Association wants long-term changes in how the lakes are managed.

"We let a lot of water out in July and August, which coincided with a heat wave that we had on the East Coast, and obviously a high demand for power," Burnham said. "I'm sure there was a lot of demand on the corps to generate a lot of power at that time. We dropped quite a bit in those two months."

There's been some rain, but "we're still several inches behind," Burnham said.

The National Weather Service shows a 6.86-inch precipitation deficit for Greenville for the year since Jan. 1. So far in December, rainfall in Greenville is more than 2 inches below normal for the month.

The impact of lake levels on the local economy is important to Upstate residents and business owners. However, economic development isn't a congressionally authorized purpose for the lakes, and that's one sticking point between upstream and downstream users.

"We're going to operate the lakes in accordance with congressional mandates," Hall said. "We will make decisions based on the data versus the emotions and try to do what's right for the bigger perspective or the greater good."

Average rainfall through last spring kept reservoir levels near the corps' "guide curve" — an average seasonal lake level measurement, according to information in the corps' draft environmental assessment. Late summer and fall, though, brought below-average precipitation.